

Oversight Hearing

“CSI Washington: Does the District Columbia Need Its Own Crime Lab?”

Friday, September 22, 2006

10:00 a.m.

Room 2154 Rayburn House Office Building

Opening Statement of Chairman Tom Davis

Good morning and welcome. Today’s hearing will consider the creation of a full-service forensics lab in the District of Columbia. Today, the District of Columbia relies on the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s crime lab to handle all of its forensic capabilities, with the exception of fingerprints and firearms. The sharing of resources by the Metropolitan Police Department and the FBI has shown both progress and promise. But over time, technological developments in DNA testing, new and old case needs, and shifting priorities caused by terrorism and homeland security concerns have strained the ability to satisfy the interests of all parties. The relationship between MPD and FBI has been strong and beneficial. But perhaps the time has come for DC to have its own forensic resources.

According to the MPD website, as of September 21, the total number of murders for this year is 124. Since January of this year, homicides are down 11 percent – due in large part to the crime emergency declared 73 days ago – but violent crime is up four percent, with the increase mostly in robberies and sexual assaults. In fact, it’s my understanding that if a woman is raped in DC and there is *no* suspect, the MPD will complete a rape kit, but will not perform DNA testing on the evidence collected from the kit. Additionally, there is no database in which to enter the DNA collected, which other jurisdictions have found instrumental in solving crimes and identifying serial murders and rapists. As a father of two daughters, I find this alarming. If DC had the resources for such a database, would MPD have been able to find the killer of Valencia Mohammed’s son? Ms. Mohammed is here today to talk about her personal experiences as a mother of two sons who were killed by gun violence in DC and to give us her perspective on the need for a DC crime lab.

In 2003, the FBI crime lab moved from FBI headquarters in downtown Washington to Quantico, Virginia where it currently provides forensic services free of charge for the FBI, including terrorism and counter-intelligence cases; any duly constituted law enforcement agency in the United States; and international cases. FBI Laboratory personnel provide forensic examinations, technical support, expert witness testimony, and training to federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies.

FBI lab officials estimate that 30 percent of their overall caseload is from DC. To help ease this burden on the FBI lab, MPD and FBI signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2004. The MOU permits MPD employees to work in the FBI lab and test evidence

from DC cases. The FBI provides those MPD employees with training, laboratory space, equipment, quality assurance measurements, and supplies. So far, the results of the MOU are promising. It helps relieve the burden on the FBI caseload caused by DC cases. Specifically in DNA testing, turn-around time for non-DC cases has been reduced slightly. The process time for trace evidence has been reduced by half for non-DC cases. The results suggest that if DC had its own full service crime lab for processing DNA and trace evidence, both DC and FBI evidence would be processed faster. If the District does get its own lab, the unit handling MPD cases may be able to relocate to the new DC lab.

Thus far, \$11.5 million has been approved by the DC Council for the architectural and engineering designs for a new DNA lab. The new lab would include: forensic and DNA testing functions, the city morgue, and the Department of Health. In addition, the facility would also include a Bio-Safety laboratory to address homeland security threats. The final estimated price tag for the facility is \$253 million. Over the next four years, that's about \$175,000 a day.

In Fiscal Years 2005 and 2006, Congress appropriated \$13 million for bioterrorism and a forensics laboratory in DC. Slated to open in 2010, city leaders are hoping the Federal government will take on 37 percent of the total cost while the District will fund the remaining 63 percent.

It must be difficult for a detective to tell a family member whose loved-one was just murdered that, "We have no leads, no suspect, and no evidence." But it is undoubtedly a dismal affair for that same detective to tell a family, "We'll have to wait – we have all the evidence, we might have a suspect, but we just have to wait for evidence testing." If the District had its own full-service forensics lab, would these conversations still occur? Would the crime statistics in DC go down? Would there be a reduction in the number of cold cases?

Today's hearing will help determine the need, the means, and the way to hopefully turn a "cold case" into a "case closed."